
"To Live Outside the Law..."

Posted by wurlitzer - 2009/11/05 06:30

"The Line-Up," Don Siegal's 1958 crime thriller, came out on DVD today. After a scene in which the Eli Wallach character kills a guy who has tried to cheat him out of \$1,000, he explains his action to his partner with this line:

"When you live outside the law, you have to eliminate dishonesty."

If this is Dylan's source for the line "to live outside the law you must be honest," the line can be read as meaning that if you consort with criminals, you had better always be straight with them, or they just might blow you away.

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Re:"To Live Outside the Law..."

Posted by Tim Out of Mind - 2009/11/05 07:52

Sounds like a DVD I should be purchasing. Nice reference, wurlitzer.

Not sure if that is Dylan's source but would not be surprising, unless he came up with it himself of course. Either way, great line, and you're on the money with its meaning, at least one of them.

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Re:"To Live Outside the Law..."

Posted by Littlesadie - 2009/11/05 08:32

The connection between the film line and Bob Dylan's use of it has already been cited and discussed in the following:

The film contains the line, "When you live outside the law, you have to eliminate dishonesty," of which Jonathan Letham writes that "Bob Dylan heard it..., cleaned it up a little, and inserted it into 'Absolutely Sweet Marie'" (as "To live outside the law you must be honest.").

^ Jonathan Lethem, "The Ecstasy of Influence", Harper's, February 2007, 59-71. p. 59.

Dylan did not perform "Sweet Marie" live until 1988, and has intermittently played it since, including during a session for his MTV Unplugged appearance. - Wikipedia

Also cited here: Da Capo Best Music Writing 2002: The Year's Finest Writing on Rock, Pop ...By Jonathan Lethem, Paul Bresnick

http://books.google.com/books?id=8g9-L3ymrq4C&pg=PA101&lpg=PA101&dq=To+live+outside+the+law+you+must+eliminate+dishonesty&source=bl&ots=4BIR9dB8Xt&sig=4qp-UJh2YILHts9s2F_5sSo__Dg&hl=en&ei=H3nySsPGCdOX8AaXnpHrAQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=6&ved=0CBcQ6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q=To%20live%20outside%20the%20law%20you%20must%20eliminate%20dishonesty&f=false

Discussed Here:

<http://expectingrain.com/discussions/viewtopic.php?f=6&t=35505&start=0&sid=72458f3d21420736efd4aba85bf227e8&view=print>

Sorry, but you may have to copy and paste the entire link in your browser to get to the exact location with the information.

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Re:"To Live Outside the Law..."

Posted by jackobob - 2009/11/05 14:38

i agree.

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Re:\\"To Live Outside the Law...\"

Posted by wurlitzer - 2009/11/05 18:03

it is not important who cited the source first. What matters is that those who care are made aware of it. my interpretation of the line completely changed after hearing the line in the context of the movie. I had always assumed Bob was saying that those who choose to disregard the laws of society must have a moral code stronger than the one they reject. also interesting is that the line was spoken in the context of a heroin pick-up, and the dylan song clearly references heroin in the previous couplet (six white horses that you have promised were finally delivered down to the penitentiary)

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Re:\\"To Live Outside the Law...\"

Posted by Nutopia - 2009/11/05 18:41

I've thought about this line, applied this line, and lived this line for years, hehe... one of my favorites. I've started and deleted about 10 different replies already because it's a line I can't really nail down with one specific meaning or example. But I do love talking about it!

So, this popped into my head just now... it might be totally stupid, but this is just a message board so I'll put it out there: what about flipping it around?

"To live within the law you (can/must) be dishonest" That's an intriguing notion... living only by the confines of the law, you can operate as a deceitful, immoral individual. What about the use of "can" vs "must" in that context? If we go with "must" then it becomes a rule: living only by the confines of the law ultimately means you are dishonest - perhaps because you have no moral compass of your own, but only one which society has forced upon you.

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Re:\\"To Live Outside the Law...\"

Posted by quanta - 2009/11/05 19:24

good catch nutopia

our minds are bought and paid for and we bristle to acknowledge it

being honest is outside the law -- some one got crucified for it

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Re:\\"To Live Outside the Law...\"

Posted by wurlitzer - 2009/11/05 19:33

one of the enduring things about the line is how it can be flipped to reveal different meanings. i'll bet a lot of dylan fans have been pondering and applying it more often than any other philosophical adage they might have been taught in school. i like your idea on the dishonesty of living within the law. the song's other references to the perils of being in bad company make me think bob is leaning towards survival within the criminal code rather than those of so-called honest society,

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Re:\\"To Live Outside the Law...\"

Posted by Tim Out of Mind - 2009/11/06 08:11

is a classic Dylan line as we know he likes to flip words around or "make" you think twice about some notion you had conceived previously (i.e. there's no success like failure and failure's no success at all, etc.)

what's up is down, what isn't is, you'll find out when you reach the top, you're on the bottom :laugh:

it's all good!

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Re:"To Live Outside the Law..."

Posted by wurlitzer - 2009/11/06 22:59

Tim, I find it remarkable that, after 40 years, there are still new ways to flip the lyrics of songs that I first heard in high school.

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Re:"To Live Outside the Law..."

Posted by Tim Out of Mind - 2009/11/07 08:50

Yeah - I forget who in recent memory, but one artist (I want to say Elvis Costello or someone like that) said something like when he wrote a song he thought it was about this or that but years later he realized that it really was about something else...and he wrote it himself! :laugh:

Fine line between a new can of worms and analysis paralysis I suppose.

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Re:"To Live Outside the Law..."

Posted by Chimes - 2009/11/07 23:42

"songs and music have always inspired me" ~Bob Dylan

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Re:"To Live Outside the Law..."

Posted by jackobob - 2009/11/08 00:54

i agree

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Re:

Posted by Le bateau ivre - 2009/11/08 04:51

I always took the "outside the law" line to be very straightforward and refer to the honor code among thieves. If you live outside the protection of the law, you have to be honest - with your fellow criminals - or you'll end up dead, or the whole enterprise will collapse in a blood bath, or the law will gain the upper hand.

I think Wurlitzer's initial interpretation is very interesting and, perhaps, compatible with the "honor among thieves" meaning. In order to succeed, criminals do need a moral code stronger than that of law-abiding folks, even though the criminal's moral code is used for ill intent.

BTW - one of my favorite Dylan lines and off of the same album: "Well I might look like Robert Ford, but I feel just like Jesse James."

But this line...

Tim Out of Mind wrote:

is a classic Dylan line as we know he likes to flip words around or "make" you think twice about some notion you had conceived previously (i.e. there's no success like failure and failure's no success at all, etc.)
...really drives me crazy. When I hear it, I have the feeling I'm hearing words with some deep philosophical meaning. But, in my gut, I feel it's really nonsensical. Am I wrong? I would love to be. It's hard for me to believe that Dylan threw a meaningless (but feigning deepness, which makes it all the worse) phrase into such a brilliant and wonderful song.

Can someone please tell me what, if anything, this line means to them? Has it been discussed? I googled it once several years ago (it's been bothering me for probably 30 odd years now) and found nothing. My own thoughts on it don't add up to much. All I can come up with on my own is that failure can lead to greater growth, wisdom, etc. than can success. But, even so, failure is still coming up short, missing the mark and is not desirable or something to be sought after. This might be true, but it seems a little trite and unsatisfying to me.

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Re:

Posted by wurlitzer - 2009/11/08 05:23

it could mean that those who are truly successful (making breakthroughs in their fields, for instance) are more often punished than rewarded for their achievements. van gogh is the classic example of the artist whose success brought him material pain. jesus christ is a more extreme example: a man without sin who died a criminal's death. there is no success like failure because the greatest successes are a failure according to the status quo. onward the the second part: failure is no success at all. what's the sense of trying if the highest achievements receive the greatest penalties. again, van gogh could make no claims of success because the circumstances of his career spelled failure. if you paint the great picture and nobody wants to buy it, how can you claim it is as a success. Meanwhile, the mediocre product usually brings a fair price., but the person who creates it knows himself a failure for producing such crap, so cannot consider himself a success, despite the comfortable regard, In brief: The greatest successes are rejected by the world as failures. Therefore, such failures cannot be counted as successes.

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Re:

Posted by Le bateau ivre - 2009/11/08 06:39

I missed these first time through. Good stuff.

Nutopia wrote:

What about the use of "can" vs "must" in that context? If we go with "must" then it becomes a rule: living only be the confines of the law ultimately means you are dishonest - perhaps because you have no moral compass of your own, but only one which society has forced upon you.
Or at least one who lives within the law never knows whether they are truly honest or not; whether their honesty is genuine or compelled by fear of societal sanction.

quanta wrote:

our minds are bought and paid for and we bristle to acknowledge it

being honest is outside the law -- some one got crucified for it
Excellent. I've always felt this to be true.

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Re:

Posted by Le bateau ivre - 2009/11/08 06:41

wurlitzer wrote:

it could mean that those who are truly successful (making breakthroughs in their fields, for instance) are more often punished than rewarded for their achievements. van gogh is the classic example of the artist whose success brought him material pain. jesus christ is a more extreme example: a man without sin who died a criminal's death. there is no success like failure because the greatest successes are a failure according to the status quo. onward the the second

part: failure is no success at all. what's the sense of trying if the highest achievements receive the greatest penalties. again, van gogh could make no claims of success because the circumstances of his career spelled failure. if you paint the great picture and nobody wants to buy it, how can you claim it is as a success. Meanwhile, the mediocre product usually brings a fair price., but the person who creates it knows himself a failure for producing such crap, so cannot consider himself a success, despite the comfortable regard, In brief: The greatest successes are rejected by the world as failures. Therefore, such failures cannot be counted as successes.
Thank you, wurlitzer. A very credible interpretation. The more I think about it, the more I like it. Thanks for taking the time.

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Re: "To Live Outside the Law..."

Posted by Chimes - 2009/11/08 22:07

Living outside the law, may be a result of an moral obligation, a different point of view of the current standard and not necessarily of bad character. Law is evolving and no doubt for reason.

W.L. Harrison said, 'that which is not just is not law'. His principals and convictions persuaded him to be honest about just that.

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Re:

Posted by jackobob - 2009/11/14 23:15

Chimes wrote:

W.L. Harrison said, 'that which is not just is not law'. His principals and convictions persuaded him to be honest about just that.

i agree.

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Re:

Posted by wurlitzer - 2009/11/14 23:58

Chimes wrote:

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Law doesnt evolve. It is fixed.
Neither is it just.
It is only upheld in order to maintain a social order.

"Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid" is an excellent treatise on the inflexibility, unjustness, and immorality of the law.

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Re:

Posted by wurlitzer - 2009/11/15 00:01

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"Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid" is an excellent treatise on the inflexibility, unjustness, and immorality of the law.

Those who represent the law are always right,
no matter which side they are on.

Re:\\"To Live Outside the Law...\"

Posted by Chimes - 2009/11/15 02:48

Arguments don't have to be dull.

True, sometimes there are interpretations of what is written and not what you wish was written. True again, there are many indications of disappointment from when prior decisions have been dismantled and/or seriously undermined.

To be honest, is that not good enough? I would agree, that is the exception to the rule.

Re:\\"To Live Outside the Law...\"

Posted by willie mctell - 2009/11/15 08:59

I used to have a bumper sticker on my old car that said ""to live outside the law you must be honest" I got it at a Dylan concert. I don't remember if it was official or something I bought in the parking lot.

Re:\\"To Live Outside the Law...\"

Posted by wurlitzer - 2009/11/16 00:13

If the cops have a warrant out for your arrest, be sure all your traffic tickets have been paid.

Re:\\"To Live Outside the Law...\"

Posted by Pufmama - 2009/11/16 00:28

sometimes you just find yourself over the line

Re:

Posted by wurlitzer - 2009/11/16 07:44

Pufmama wrote:
sometimes you just find yourself over the line

„if there ever was a line

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